

# RESOLVE

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## **BANGLADESH ON THE BRINK:** Mapping the Evolving Social Geography of Political Violence



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The views in this report are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of RESOLVE Network, its partners, or the United States Institute of Peace.

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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is a product of the combined efforts of two leading researchers on Bangladesh—Matthew J. Nelson and Seth Oldmixon—and several members of the RESOLVE Secretariat, including Director Candace Rondeaux, Research Associate Kateira Aryaeinejad, and Associate Coordinators Bethany McGann and Megan Loney. Matthew Nelson is a Reader in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). His research focuses on the comparative and international politics of South Asia, with an emphasis on non-elite politics, comparative political thought, the politics of Islamic institutions, and democracy. Seth Oldmixon is a public affairs consultant who served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in Bangladesh. He is the founder of Liberty South Asia, an independent, privately funded campaign dedicated to supporting religious freedom and political pluralism in South Asia.

The result of desk research and findings from three expert workshops hosted by the RESOLVE Network in Bangladesh and Washington, DC, from November 2016 to April 2017, this report is part of a series of country studies that seeks to map emergent trends in political violence in Bangladesh. The report is intended to place violent extremism in a historical context, survey current challenges, and identify gaps in knowledge that will be the target of future research by those in the Network and others. The analysis conducted for this report surfaced insights regarding the sharp rise of violent extremism in the country. Discussions with stakeholders in Bangladesh and a desk review of the literature also revealed critical gaps in current research, particularly with respect to the link between domestic dynamics and the wider international trends that have catalyzed a surge in politically motivated violence targeting civilians around the world.

The analysis conducted for this report is part of a broader effort by the RESOLVE Network to address the gaps in locally informed, empirically driven research on the drivers of violent extremism in South Asia and other priority regions. The RESOLVE Network launched a pilot research network in Bangladesh in October 2016 to assess the risks and identify potential sources of community resilience within the country's increasingly volatile political climate. The RESOLVE Secretariat team worked closely with locally based researchers under the rubric of the Network's flagship Research Leadership Fellowship to explore different aspects of dynamics surrounding political violence in the country. Additional studies in this series will be published individually and as part of a compendium later in 2017.

For more information about RESOLVE and its network of experts in Bangladesh and elsewhere across parts of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, please visit our website at [www.resolvenet.org](http://www.resolvenet.org) and follow the discussion on Twitter via @resolvenet.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The July 2016 attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka, changed the way the world thinks about political violence in Bangladesh. The attack killed 18 foreigners and produced a record number of casualties, exposing new dimensions in the rise of violent extremism in the country and in South Asia writ large. The young men who planned and conducted the assault in an upscale café in Dhaka's Gulshan neighborhood were mostly middle class. Several had studied abroad; others had earned degrees from some of Bangladesh's most prestigious universities. Some of the alleged perpetrators were also Bangladeshis with foreign nationalities. The attackers' privileged backgrounds struck a dissonant note with many of their compatriots, who had previously associated such brutal acts of violence with those who are poor and uneducated. It remains unclear whether the attackers were inspired by homegrown grievances, international influences and larger ideological movements, or a combination of both. What is clear is that the elite backgrounds of the attackers have led many to question the long-held belief that violence in Bangladesh is driven by poverty, poor education, and ignorance. Rather than view the attack as an aberration, however, the incident is better perceived as an expression of larger ongoing trends.

## History and Drivers of Violence

Bangladesh has a long history of political violence that predates its independence in 1971. Contrasting views of the nature of the state as secular and Bengali, or as Islamic and Bangladeshi, have fueled unrest ever since. This polarization continued to escalate in the past decade as the two major political parties—the Awami League and Bangladeshi Nationalist Party—competed for power.

Today, Bangladesh appears to be entering a perilous new phase of potential instability. The situation in Dhaka reflects a deep political polarization precipitated in part by sharp economic inequality and unresolved governance challenges. A recent escalation in political violence across the country could presage even greater instability as the nation nears its 2019 national elections. Moreover, safe spaces for public discourse and nonviolent political dissent seem to be shrinking rapidly. The historical background, as well as the political and economic contexts in which these dynamics are occurring, require careful consideration.

## Effects of Migration and Social Dislocation

In the past 20 years, the economy of Bangladesh has grown exponentially in tandem with the country's rapid integration into the globalized marketplace. Unprecedented growth in the garment trade, in particular, has fueled rapid urbanization, unexpected social change, and cultural dislocation. Women's roles in shaping the labor market and economy have expanded as their employment in the manufacturing sector has grown with the industry. This shift in gender dynamics could elicit a backlash among Bangladeshi extremist groups that advocate against women's empowerment.



Internationally, millions of itinerant Bangladeshi workers have migrated in search of employment in the global economy. The remittances from these migrant workers can help fuel growth; however, the ideas about political power, religion, and identity, as well as the networks to which these migrants are exposed while abroad, could influence trends in political violence once they return home. Rising Internet access and the falling cost of communications have expanded Bangladeshis' access to ideas and people globally, but these factors have also created new channels for those with violent intent, including the virulent ideologies of Da'esh<sup>1</sup> and al-Qaeda. These connections have already catalyzed an outcropping of domestic Bangladeshi affiliates of organizations including al-Qaeda and Da'esh and increased the threat of violence.

## Crafting a Response

The Bangladeshi state is struggling to keep up with these rapid and substantive changes and appears unsure how to appropriately use the tools of state authority, such as the security forces, in response to new dynamics. Excessive use of deadly force by police against alleged violent extremists risks undermining the legitimacy of the state. Moreover, Bangladesh's long tradition of constitutional secularism appears, to some, to be fraying. This process could invoke negative perceptions of the government and its ability to uphold equal and fair treatment for all of its citizens. A government response that is passive, that criticizes the victims of religiously motivated violence, that narrowly defines what constitutes a legitimate form of peaceful political activity, or that selectively defines what constitutes radical speech or extremist violence would risk fomenting further discontent and eroding democratic norms. The risk may be even higher if these polarizing trends continue in advance of the 2019 elections.

## Conclusions

In the wake of the July 2016 attack and a widespread escalation of political violence, it is increasingly imperative to better understand and address the challenges posed by the evolving social geography of political identity at home and violent social movements abroad.

Several key areas, in particular, warrant further study:

- The driving forces that have brought individuals together to foment violent attacks, such as the one on Holey Artisan Bakery, including the roles of education, employment, and narratives surrounding individual frustrations.
- The socioeconomic changes resulting from globalization and economic progress in the past two decades, particularly in terms of their contribution to violence.
- The political trends shaping government, governance, and who holds power in Bangladesh, to ensure that the importance of the country's evolving political context and its relationship to violence are acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup> Da'esh is an Arabic translation of the acronym for the Islamic State in the Levant, also known as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). The RESOLVE Network refers to ISIS by this Arabic acronym.

# INTRODUCTION

The July 2016 terrorist attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, Bangladesh, called into question some popular assumptions underlying theories about the drivers of violent extremism in Bangladesh. Preliminary research conducted by the RESOLVE Network shows that violent extremism has been understudied in Bangladesh relative to other countries facing similar challenges.<sup>2</sup> Few major longitudinal studies have been conducted on the discourse of religious violence and the relationships among religious identity, citizenship, political legitimacy, governance, and social cohesion in Bangladesh. The little research that has been conducted by local and international researchers, experts, and area specialists on these themes has largely centered on perception polling data generated by Western survey teams with a limited sense of the granular trends and dynamic narratives that inform Bangladeshi conceptions of religious identity, citizenship, and governance. Publicly available data on the highly fluid local dynamics that have fueled the rise of violent extremist groups across all eight of the country's subnational political divisions is also lacking. This paucity has led to serious gaps in our understanding of how to respond effectively to the threats posed by extremism.

The analysis in this report is informed by three RESOLVE Network expert workshops conducted in Washington, DC and in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a review of the existing literature. It is intended to provide a broad overview of the historical context and current climate in Bangladesh while also locating gaps in the research on the drivers of violent extremism that merit further investigation. In discussions with more than 150 local Bangladeshi researchers, practitioners, and policymakers over the 10-month period leading up to the publication of this report, concerns were repeatedly raised about the intensifying polarization within the country and the lack of avenues for open public discussion about the politics of religion in the country. Protests at universities over the content of history and political science textbooks and aggressive demands from Islamist groups for the removal of symbolic vestiges of its colonialist and pluralist history are only the latest manifestations of the shrinking space for open debate. At one end of the spectrum, secularism is posited as extreme and anti-religious, even overtly disrespectful of the traditions of the country's Muslim majority. Protections for the country's Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and Ahmadi minorities are seen, from this perspective, as a matter of lesser concern. At the other end of the spectrum, avowed atheists and others championing secularism and protection for minority rights aggressively reject what they view as a conservative Islamist push to seize control of the state. In this context, substantive coordination and communication between the government's administrative and security organs, as well as between the government and its citizens, grows increasingly important.

Findings from this report and the project overall show the importance of reconsidering conventional explanations for the rise of violent extremism in Bangladesh, specifically those based on education and poverty. The findings also highlight the importance of new factors related to rapid globalization, urbanization, socioeconomic change, and the ongoing relationship between internal and international political dynamics. High-quality research on the link between these factors and support for violent extremism in the country is needed to inform effective policy responses moving forward.

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2 RESOLVE Network Secretariat, "The Governance Nexus: Surveying the Research on Violent Extremism, Governance Failures, and the Quest for Political Legitimacy." RESOLVE Network Working Paper Series 1, no. 3, June, 2017.



# BACKGROUND

## The Politics of the Secular and the Sacred in Bangladesh (1971–90)

Conflicts over the relationship between the state and religion—specifically, Islam—during the founding and evolution of the Bangladeshi state are crucial in understanding the nature and drivers of violent extremism in the country. Roughly ninety percent of Bangladesh’s nearly 163 million people are Muslim, with an overwhelming Sunni majority.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that, in this context, postcolonial political discourse in Bangladesh has been framed as a struggle between the competing national identities of secular “Bengali” versus Islamist nationalism.

In the 1950s, Bengali intellectuals in what was then East Pakistan modified the principles of the “two-nation theory” to justify the creation of two separate homelands for South Asian Muslims. They argued that Bengalis were a separate “nation” from those in West Pakistan, defined by their unique language and culture.<sup>4</sup> West Pakistani elites attempted to crush this nationalist movement, eventually refusing to recognize the results of a national election in 1970 won by East Pakistan’s Bengali nationalist Awami League (AL), plunging the country into civil war.

Human rights abuses by the Pakistan Army and its Islamist proxies in East Pakistan, including a systematic program of rape ostensibly aimed at “purifying” the Bengali population, severely narrowed the scope for any future Bangladeshi attachment to a national identity based on religion. In fact student militias associated with an Islamist party known as the Jama’at-e-Islami (JI)—often described as a South Asian analogue of the Muslim Brotherhood—collaborated with the Pakistan Army in its effort to thwart the independence of Bangladesh, promoting a Pakistan-style Islamist nationalism as a counter to the AL’s ethno-linguistic Bengali nationalism. The JI party was banned shortly after Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971.

The ban on the JI, however, was lifted in 1975 by Major General Ziaur Rahman, who took power following the assassination of the country’s first president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In a bid to gain legitimacy while acting as Chief Martial Law Administrator, General Zia, as he was known, amended the Constitution via Executive Order in 1977, replacing the commitment to the principle of secularism with “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah.”<sup>5</sup> He then founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which relied on religion to unite otherwise disparate groups against the AL. The BNP eventually emerged as the second largest political party and the main opponent of the AL.<sup>6</sup> The BNP’s ideology asserts Islamic

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3 Pew Research Center, “Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Muslim Population,” (Washington, DC: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Pew Research Center, 2009), 5.

4 Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 25-26).

5 Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History Since Independence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 71-72.

6 The AL grew out of a movement on university campuses during the 1950s to preserve Bengali as the lingua franca of East Pakistan; see Tariq Rahman, “The Urdu-English Controversy in Pakistan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (February 1997),

religious identity and “Bangladeshi,” as opposed to “Bengali” nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Unlike “Bengali” nationalism, based on Bengali language and culture, “Bangladeshi” nationalism envisions a state defined by religion—Islam—and territory.<sup>8</sup>

While a pro-Islamist strategy broadened the BNP’s political base, the party was unable to consolidate its hold on the state. General Zia was assassinated during a 1981 coup. Bangladesh’s next key leader, Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who took power in a 1982 coup, similarly employed Islamist rhetoric. For a brief moment, it seemed that General Ershad might enjoy more success in consolidating political power.<sup>9</sup>

## From Mainstream Politics to Militant Political Tactics (1990-2008)

As mainstream party politicians continued to leverage pro-Islamist political rhetoric to build their political base, an undercurrent of religious extremism began to take shape in Bangladesh. Some scholars trace this post-independence wave of right-wing religious militancy to the return of veterans from the Afghan jihad after 1992.<sup>10</sup> That year, a group of mujahideen returned from Afghanistan and announced the formation of a Bangladeshi wing of the Pakistani militant group Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, known as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh, or HuJI-B, led by Maulana Abdus Salam.<sup>11</sup> HuJI-B has been accused of perpetrating some of the terrorist attacks in Bangladesh, including a 1993 death threat against the secular author Taslima Nasreen; a 1999 assassination attempt targeting the poet Shamsur Rahman; and a 2000 assassination attempt targeting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leader of the AL since 1981.<sup>12</sup> HuJI-B was banned in October 2005, and one of its leaders, Mufti Abdul Hannan, was executed after being convicted for multiple attacks in April 2017.<sup>13</sup>

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177-207; *The Nation’s Voice, Vol. VII: Launching the State and the End of the Journey (August 1947-September 1948)*, ed. by Waheed Ahmad (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 2003), 243-58.

7 Tariq Rahman, “The Urdu-English Controversy in Pakistan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (February 1997), 177-207; *The Nation’s Voice, Vol. VII: Launching the State and the End of the Journey (August 1947-September 1948)*, ed. by Waheed Ahmad (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 2003), 243-58.

8 For more on this topic, see: Tanveer Fazal, “Religion and Language in the Formation of Nationhood in Pakistan and Bangladesh,” in *Nation and National Identity in South Asia*, ed. by S.L. Sharma and T. K. Oommen, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 175-200.

9 Sheila Tefft, “Bangladesh Leader’s Islamization Push Faces Hurdles: Political Suspicions and a ‘Laissez-Faire’ Culture Undermine Ershad’s Effort,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 13, 1988.

10 Ali Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web* (London: Routledge, 2008), 45.

11 Mohammad Jamil Khan, “Ferocious HujiB Now on the Wane,” *Dhaka Tribune*, August 21, 2016.

12 Bertil Lintner, “Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh,” in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, 421, ed. S. Limaye, R. Wirsing, and M. Malik (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004) ; C. Christine Fair, Ali Hamza, and Rebecca Heller, “Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?,” 2016, 12.

13 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 1; Shariful Islam and Shakhawat Liton, “Huji Kingpin Muft Hannan Hanged,” *The Daily Star*, April 13, 2017.

In 2002 and 2004, respectively, two other militant Islamic organizations, the Jama'at-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and its affiliate, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), emerged on the political scene. Abdur Rahman formed JMB in 2004 with the goal of establishing Islamic rule in Bangladesh after meeting with members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood while studying at the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia. He then traveled to Pakistan, where he received training in weapons and strategy from Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).<sup>14</sup> JMB's strongest link to an international terrorist group has been to LeT,<sup>15</sup> although more recently, JMB has reportedly been recruiting for Da'esh.<sup>16</sup>

JMJB, in contrast, originally focused on eliminating left-wing militants—the Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP), in particular—that operated in the northwestern district of Rajshahi, the southeastern district of Satkhira, and the southwestern district of Chittagong, among others. Led by the mysterious commander Siddiqui Islam, commonly known as “Bangla Bhai,” JMJB's overarching goal was, like JMB's, to “establish a Taliban-like rule” via armed jihad.<sup>17</sup> Abdur Rahman of JMB and Siddiqui Islam of JMJB are believed to have planned joint attacks together.<sup>18</sup>

At an opposition rally in August 2004, JMJB carried out an attack on AL supporters, killing twenty people and narrowly missing the party's leader, Sheikh Hasina.<sup>19</sup> Another attack in January 2005 killed five more AL workers, including a former finance minister.<sup>20</sup> The incumbent government, led by the BNP and the JI within a so-called “Four-Party Alliance,” banned the JMB and the JMJB in February 2005. A few months later, in August 2005, JMB coordinated one of the largest terrorist attacks in Bangladesh, consisting of 459 explosions across sixty-three of the country's sixty-four districts in just forty minutes—killing around thirty people and wounding another 150.<sup>21</sup> The scale of this attack and the international attention it received rendered untenable denials that Islamist militancy posed a serious and immediate threat to the country's internal or national security.<sup>22</sup>

The JI party has repeatedly denied any association with JMB and JMJB, but a number of JMB and JMJB militants claim to have been inspired by the JI. Many of those militants, including the leaders of both groups, previously participated in JI's youth wing, Islami Chattra Shibir (ICS).<sup>23</sup> The BNP also denied any ties to violent religious extremism, although evidence indicates that the BNP has been willing to use

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14 Tipu Sultan, “Salafi Ideology behind JMB's Rise,” *Prothom Alo*, August 6, 2016.

15 International Crisis Group, “The Threat from Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh,” Asia Report No. 187, 2010, 3, 7-8; Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 118.

16 Lisa Curtis, “Why the Extremist Threat in Bangladesh Needs to Be Taken Seriously,” *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2015.

17 Julfikar Ali Manik, “Bangla Bhai Active for 6 Yrs,” *The Daily Star*, May 13, 2004.

18 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 120.

19 Eben Kaplan, “Bangladesh: Nationwide Attacks Raise Fears of Growing Islamist Presence,” Background, New Council on Foreign Relations, 2005.

20 Ibid.

21 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 45.

22 “Bombs Explode across Bangladesh,” *BBC News*, August 17, 2005.

23 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 45.

religious violence to serve its political goals. In 2001, BNP supporters carried out targeted acts of violence against minority Hindus and Ahmadis to suppress their participation in the general elections.<sup>24</sup>

Recent investigations and US State Department cables published by Wikileaks suggest that the BNP-JI alliance was not only complicit in the 2004 bombings that targeted AL members; it was also involved in protecting JMJB and JMB members after the 2005 attacks.<sup>25</sup> In 2003, the JI publicly condemned an umbrella organization known as Khatm-e-Nabuwat encompassing different groups bent on attacking the Ahmadi minority. Following a series of anti-Ahmadi attacks in 2003-04, the government did not prosecute those affiliated with Khatm-e-Nabuwat. Instead, it banned what it described as “provocative” Ahmadi publications.<sup>26</sup> Due to increased attacks on Ahmadis during this period, the US government made religious freedom a central point of discussion in its meetings with Bangladeshi officials.<sup>27</sup>

## Escalating Polarization (2009–17)

After two years under the administration of a military caretaker government, the AL returned to power following elections in 2008 and has remained in office since that time. It was elected on a platform that promised to establish a war crimes tribunal to prosecute those accused of abuses during Bangladesh’s war for independence, something that had been demanded by veterans of the 1971 war and considered “long overdue” by international human rights organizations.<sup>28</sup> The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), established in 2009, began arresting suspected war criminals, most of whom were high-ranking members of JI.<sup>29</sup> International human rights groups have expressed concern about the tribunal’s failure to meet international standards of justice since its establishment—standards relating to fair trials, fundamental rights, and judicial impartiality, in particular.<sup>30</sup> In February 2013, JI leader Abdul Qader Mollah was convicted of atrocities committed while collaborating with the Pakistan Army during the 1971 war and sentenced to life in prison. Hundreds of thousands of protesters demonstrated in Dhaka’s Shahbagh Square demanding that he be sentenced to death.<sup>31</sup>

A few months later, other mass demonstrations took place, this time organized by the Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam, with the support of the BNP and JI. Gathered in Dhaka’s Shapla Square, they called for a

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24 Amnesty International, “Bangladesh: Attacks on Members of the Hindu Minority,” December, 2001.

25 Julfikar A. Manik, “Three Terrorists Spilled the Beans,” *Dhaka Tribune*, August 21, 2014; “Bangla Bhai’s Deputy Khamaru Arrested Again,” *Dhaka Tribune*, September 26, 2016. US Embassy Dhaka, “JMB Terrorist Investigation Marches On—Up to a Point.” Wikileaks Cable: 06DHAKA2573\_a. Dated May 3, 2006.

26 Ibid., 34-36.

27 US Department of State, “International Freedom Report,” 2005.

28 Mark Dummat, “Calls for Bangladesh War Trials,” *BBC News*, March 21, 2008; Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Unique Opportunity for Justice for 1971 Atrocities,” 2011.

29 David Montero, “Bangladesh Arrests Are Opening Act of War Crimes Tribunal,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 14, 2010.

30 Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Guarantee Fair Trials for Independence-Era Crimes,” July 11, 2011a.

31 Tahmima Anam, “Shahbag Protesters versus the Butcher of Mirpur,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2013.

13-point platform to transform Bangladesh into an Islamic state.<sup>32</sup> During this period, clashes between Islamists and police resulted in more than 150 deaths and thousands of injuries.<sup>33</sup> Among Hefazat's demands was that "the 'atheist leaders' of the Shahbagh protests, bloggers, and other 'anti-Islamists'" be arrested and issued "stern" punishments. These demonstrations presented as a physical manifestation of the ideological clashes that had been growing for several years.

Violence targeting religious minorities returned in force during the 2014 elections, but it was the surge of attacks unrelated to elections that signaled a new era of violence for the country.<sup>34</sup> Between February 2013 and June 2016, thirty-nine victims described as "secularist" or "atheist" bloggers critical of Islamic fundamentalism were assassinated by means of guns, machetes, and small explosions.<sup>35</sup> These killings also targeted Hindus, Christians, Shi'a, and human rights activists. In one notable instance, extremists also targeted an English professor who was neither an "atheist" nor particularly "secular" in his personal habits or beliefs.<sup>36</sup> Many of these killings were variously claimed by JMB;<sup>37</sup> by another militant organization known as the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), a group that many see as a splinter or a more radical regrouping of JMB;<sup>38</sup> or by Al-Qaeda and Da'esh.

Up to this point, the targets were Bangladeshi nationals. Then, in September 2015, an Italian aid worker was killed in the Gulshan neighborhood of Dhaka, the same elite residential neighborhood where the Holey Artisan Bakery is based.<sup>39</sup> The attack on the bakery nine months later, with its high casualty rate and targeting of foreigners, made it impossible to see the attacks as merely cases of domestic political violence. In all, twenty-nine people were killed, including twenty hostages, two police officers, five gunmen, and two bakery staff. Eighteen of the twenty hostages killed were foreigners. Da'esh immediately claimed the credit for the attack.<sup>40</sup>

Bangladeshi society was shocked by the affluent and well-educated backgrounds of many of the young men involved, as it had previously been widely accepted that Islamist jihadis were economically disadvantaged

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32 Mohammad Al-Masum Molla, "BNP Tells Activists to Support Hefazat," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 6, 2013; Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, "Jamaat Extends Support to Hifazat-e-Islam's Long March Set for Saturday," April 5, 2013; Haroon Habib, "The 13-Point Demands," *The Hindu*, April 7, 2013.

33 Human Rights Watch, "Blood on the Streets: The Use of Excessive Force During Bangladesh Protests," August 1, 2013.

34 Victor Mallet, "Hindu Minority Become Target of Bangladesh Violence," *Financial Times*, January 13, 2014.

35 Geeta Anand and Julfikar A. Manik, "Bangladesh Says It Now Knows Who's Killing the Bloggers," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2016.

36 Atif J. Ahmad and Michael Kugelman, "How to Keep the Bangladesh Powder Keg from Exploding," *The National Interest*, July 4, 2016.

37 Shaikh A. Rahman, "Churches in Bangladesh Face New Islamist Threats," *Voice of America News*, December 2, 2015.

38 Ellen Barry, "Bangladeshi Suspected of Training Militants in Dhaka Bakery Attack Is Killed," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2017.

39 Julfikar Ali Manik and David Barstow, "ISIS Says It Killed Italian Aid Worker In Bangladesh," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2015.

40 "Bangladesh Siege: Twenty Killed at Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka," *BBC News*, July 2, 2016.



and poorly educated.<sup>41</sup> The alleged mastermind, Tamim Chowdhury, was a Canadian citizen who had studied at the University of Windsor.<sup>42</sup> Other attackers had attended the elite Monash University in Malaysia, including Nibras Islam (also known as Abu Muharib al-Bengal), whose father was a wealthy businessman and whose family had connections in the AL government. Andaleeb Ahmad and Rohan Imtiaz also had government ties. Nibras Islam, Rohan Imtiaz, and Meer Saameh Mubasheer had attended elite educational institutions in Dhaka, including the Scholastica school and North South University. Khairul Islam was the only attacker who did not attend a prestigious school or come from a wealthy family. The attack was also noted for its sophistication and clear intent to garner global attention.<sup>43</sup>

Despite claims of responsibility by Da'esh, Bangladesh's Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said that the attack was carried out by JMB.<sup>44</sup> While Da'esh later declared that Tamim Chowdhury had been leading their Bangladesh operations, authorities insisted that the group did not have a foothold in the country.<sup>45</sup> While some questioned those denials, others suggested that recent attacks merely pointed to a larger trend in which "entrepreneurial terrorists us[ed] the space provided by Da'esh [in Iraq and Syria] as a launching pad for their ... own [domestic] jihadist ambitions."<sup>46</sup> There remains a lack of consensus regarding whether Da'esh has established a physical presence in the country, or whether domestic actors are merely inspired by the group. A lack of common understanding about who is planning and executing attacks, and why, poses a fundamental problem for those seeking to develop and implement policies to prevent violent extremism.

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41 "Bangladesh Attack: Shock over 'Elite' Holey Cafe Suspects," *BBC News*, July 4, 2016.

42 Lizzie Dearden, "ISIS Bangladesh Attack 'Mastermind' Identified as Former Student from Canada Killed in Police Raid," *The Independent*, August 27, 2016.

43 Amy Kazmin, "Dhaka Restaurant Attack Designed to Teverberate Globally," *Financial Times*, July 3, 2016.

44 Aditya Kalra, Serajul Quadir, and Ruma Paul, "Bangladesh Gunmen Made No Demands, IS Not Involved—Minister," *Reuters*, July 4, 2016.

45 Tamara Khandaker, "ISIS Just Identified a Dead Leader by Name and That's Unusual," *VICE News*, October 6, 2016.

46 Brian M. Jenkins, "Is the Surge in Terrorist Attacks Coincidence or Coordinated Campaign?," *The Hill*, November 7, 2016.



# CHALLENGING THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

## Re-examining the Poverty Theory

Conventional wisdom long held that poverty is a key driver of extremism in Bangladesh.<sup>47</sup> This theory posits a causal link between poverty and terrorism that is not unique to Bangladesh. At a 2016 meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, some Member States maintained that terrorism could be effectively countered “by addressing the socioeconomic challenges” of vulnerable countries.<sup>48</sup> Recent research and evidence, however, upends long-held beliefs about the role of poverty and education as predictors of extremist violence.

There are few studies providing solid empirical data linking poverty to support for violent extremism and political violence. To the contrary, a 2002 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that “economic conditions and education are largely unrelated to participation in and support for terrorism.”<sup>49</sup> A 2016 analysis of support for suicide bombings based on Pew polling data similarly showed that Bangladeshi men and those who saw themselves as economically better off tended to be more supportive of such attacks than women and those who perceived themselves as economically disadvantaged.<sup>50</sup>

As extremist militancy has risen, Bangladesh has by many measures become more prosperous. Overall poverty declined from 44.2 percent in 1991 to 12.9 percent in 2016.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, income inequality has risen.<sup>52</sup> In at least one major multi-country statistical study, however, poverty and income inequality were found not to be significant predictors of involvement in terrorist violence.<sup>53</sup> When combined with a growing number of anecdotal accounts of police confrontations with well-educated militants in more well-off parts of the country, the data suggest that factors other than poverty and economic inequality may be more influential, and that the link between economic factors and violent extremism is less direct than many previously believed.

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47 Ravi Velloor, “Bangladesh: Poverty and Lack of Opportunities Make It Fertile for Extremist Ideology,” *The Straits Times*, January 20, 2016.

48 United Nations General Assembly, “Links between Extreme Poverty, Violent Extremism Can Be Broken by Creating Jobs, Reducing Inequalities, General Assembly Hears as Debate Concludes,” February 16, 2016.

49 Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova. “Education, Poverty And Terrorism: Is There A Causal Connection?,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): 119-44.

50 Fair, et al., “Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh,” 28.

51 World Bank, “Bangladesh Country Overview,” 2017b.

52 Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, “Human Development in South Asia 2015: The Economy and the People,” Report No. 18, Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, Lahore University of Management Sciences, 104.

53 Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); 47, 85-86.

Although poverty and violent extremism may not be definitively linked, there may be evidence that economic policy as a function of governance has an impact.<sup>54</sup> Extremist groups around the world often take advantage of poor governance by providing much-needed social services where the state is absent or ineffective. Doing so allows them to more easily propagate their ideology by ingratiating themselves with local communities.<sup>55</sup> Saudi charities have served as an important source of funds for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, enabling them to provide health and education initiatives for disadvantaged populations.<sup>56</sup> In Pakistan, the militant group LeT carries out charity and disaster relief work under the brands of Jama'at-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation (FIF).<sup>57</sup>

In Bangladesh, the government's provision of food security, healthcare, and other basic services, complemented by a number of large and influential nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), has seen steady improvements since independence. Data analyzed by the Pew Research Center showed no correlation between a desire for service provision, on the one hand, and "sharia-supporting groups and their support for violence," on the other.<sup>58</sup> Those observations notwithstanding, some NGOs have been suspected of propagating violent extremism in the country.<sup>59</sup> By providing humanitarian work and social services in underserved areas, some extremist groups have been able to penetrate deeper into society while making it more difficult for governments to step in and shut them down. As in other parts of the world where insurgencies and violent extremism have taken root, the link between the provision of public services and goods, on the one hand, and the legitimacy of armed actors, on the other hand, is important. More research is needed to accurately evaluate the extent to which extremist groups in Bangladesh are exploiting gaps in governance, particularly in social service provision.

## Understanding the Role of Education

Another well-worn theory links madrasa-based Qur'anic studies or religious education to the proliferation of violent extremist ideologies. However, many recent attacks, including the Holey Artisan Bakery, have not been organized by madrasa students. Instead they have been organized by students from some of the most prominent secular and elite private universities. Tamim Chowdhury, the mastermind of the Holy Artisan attack, was a chemist. Siful Haque Sujan, a Bangladeshi who became one of Da'esh's top cyber experts, was educated in systems engineering at the University of Glamorgan in Wales.<sup>60</sup> Touhidur Rahman, another computer engineer, funded and directed ABT militants in Bangladesh from his home in London.<sup>61</sup>

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54 Fair, et al., "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," 19-20.

55 Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011), 186.

56 Corinne Graff, "Poverty, Development, and Violent Extremism in Weak States," in *Confronting Poverty: Weak States and U.S. National Security*, ed. Susan E. Rice, Corinne Graff, and Carlos Pascual (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 67.

57 Omar Waraich, "Terrorism-Linked Charity Finds New Life Amid Pakistan Refugee Crisis," *Time*, May 13, 2009.

58 Ibid.

59 Paul Cochrane, "The Funding Methods of Bangladesh Terrorist Groups," *CTC Sentinel*, May 15, 2009.

60 Ben Farmer, Nicola Harley, Richard Spencer, and Tom Whitehead, "Cardiff Businessman Turned ISIL Cyber Expert Killed in Air Strike," *The Telegraph*, December 30, 2015.

61 Fariha Karim, "British IT Expert 'Ran Bangladeshi Terrorist Group from London'," *The Times*, August 22, 2015.

Bangladesh's universities have been heavily politicized since the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1960s. Over subsequent decades, student activism evolved into “armed fronts of [mainstream] political parties vying for dominance on campus.”<sup>62</sup> Public universities emerged as hotbeds for political violence, with “student leaders at public universities ... regularly in the news for ... murder, killing, extortion, arson, assaults on teachers, destruction of private property, and sexual offences.”<sup>63</sup> Violence has spread to private universities as well.<sup>64</sup>

Universities may play a more significant role in violent extremism dynamics than has been considered to date. They remain a place where Islamist and secular ideas clash. The introduction of controversial changes to textbooks, in accordance with the demands of Islamist extremists in early 2017, ignited major unrest on campuses across the country. This is only one of many signs of deeper rifts within one of the few remaining spaces for open public discourse in the country.<sup>65</sup> Frictions between secular and pro-Islamist student wings of national political parties, such as ICS, as well as quietist Salafi supporters of Hizb-ut Tahrir, over faculty appointments, student housing, and curricula reflect longstanding historical divisions that have become more complex and entrenched.<sup>66</sup>

Anecdotal evidence suggests that well-educated individuals can be drawn to extremist movements out of a sense of frustrated economic and professional expectations. Much has been made of the fact that some of the Holey Artisan Bakery attackers had backgrounds in engineering and the role this profession has played in violent extremism.<sup>67</sup> It is not known if unmet career aspirations drove the frustration, disillusionment, and ultimately the radicalization of these attackers. A 2014 report found that, across South Asia, the youth bulge that resulted from rapid population growth has led to high rates of unemployment or underemployment among those with tertiary education, including almost half of Bangladeshi graduates.<sup>68</sup> Analyzing the career trajectory of individuals, however, reveals little about the social networks that inform their responses to the political or religiously-based rhetoric to which they are exposed. It is also unclear to what extent the social bonds within groups of students are formed by the faculties with whom they study or the subject matter that they study.

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62 Dina Mahnaz Siddiqui, “Contemporary Political Culture,” in *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*, ed. by Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 14.

63 M. Niaz Asadullah, “Dhaka Café Attack: Don’t Blame Private Education for Radicalisation in Bangladesh,” *The Conversation*, August 2, 2016.

64 Matthew J. Nelson, “Religion, Politics, and the Modern University in Pakistan and Bangladesh,” in *Islamic Education in Bangladesh and Pakistan: Trends in Tertiary Education*, ed. by Mumtaz Ahmad and Matthew J. Nelson (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2009).

65 Ellen Barry and Julfikar Ali Manik, “To Secular Bangladeshis, Textbook Changes Are a Harbinger,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2017.

66 Nelson, “Religion, Politics, and the Modern University in Pakistan and Bangladesh,” 61-65.

67 Gambetta and Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: Violent Extremism and Education*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 159.

68 Economic Intelligence Unit, “High University Enrolment, Low Graduate Employment: Analyzing the Paradox in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka,” January 2014.

Moreover, it is uncertain what role the barriers to social mobility that are embedded within many post-colonial educational systems might play. Obstacles to obtaining certain types of educational specialization and certain types of jobs might shape ties between individuals in university settings. A more granular analysis of the labor market and exclusionary practices within the country's educational system, or professions, deserves greater inquiry as part of a broader effort to understand violent extremist demographics, networks, and recruitment.

# EMERGING TRENDS: THE NEW SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

## Globalization

The new social geography of political violence in Bangladesh needs to be better understood. Challenging previous notions about what drives violent extremism, this new social geography provides a potentially data-rich set of case studies illuminating the impact of emerging global trends on extremism and violence. Bangladesh's rapid economic growth, driven by increased integration with the global economy, has fueled extensive urbanization and improved most socioeconomic indicators for its people.<sup>69</sup> These dynamics, however, also raise important questions about the impact, if any, of such changes on the spread of violent extremism.

The expansion of the manufacturing industry, led in part by Bangladesh's still-growing readymade garment industry, has facilitated increased trade with regional and global partners. The country's low-cost labor market has contributed to rising international demand for Bangladeshi garments and other manufactured goods, and furthered Bangladesh's integration into the global economy. In 2016, readymade garments exported to wealthy Western countries accounted for approximately eighty-two percent of all Bangladeshi exports.<sup>70</sup> Although the revenue from textile and manufacturing exports has spiraled upward in recent decades, wages have stagnated; unemployment, although diminished slightly from 2009 levels, has fluctuated.<sup>71</sup> How do these patterns feed the narratives of violent extremism in Bangladesh, particularly with respect to foreigners and the violence directed at them or at those associated with them? This is an important question that merits further research.

## Urbanization

Increases in trade and production spur the growing demand for labor in the manufacturing sector, which, in turn spurs urbanization. Between 1974 and 2011, the proportion of Bangladesh's population living in urban areas increased from nine to twenty-eight percent.<sup>72</sup> One recent estimate reports that nearly 40 million people—one-third of the country's population—reside in urban centers. More than seventy percent

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69 For the numbers from 1990 to 2016, see the World Bank Country Profile, accessed June 2017, at: [data.worldbank.org/country/Bangladesh](http://data.worldbank.org/country/Bangladesh).

70 Kiran Stacey, "Bangladesh Garment-Making Success Prompts Fears for the Wider Economy," *The Financial Times*, January 6, 2017.

71 Unemployment in Bangladesh has fallen by just under 1 percent since its peak at 5 percent in 2009. In 2016, unemployment levels in Bangladesh were 4.066 percent. For the numbers, see World Bank data, accessed June 2017, at: [data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=BD](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=BD).

72 Gavin Jones, AQM Mahbub, and Md. Izazul Haq, "Urbanization and Migration in Bangladesh," United Nations Population Fund, 2016.

of Bangladesh's projected 230 million people are expected to be urban dwellers by 2060.<sup>73</sup> Urban residents are generally young. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimates that forty-two percent of the population is younger than nineteen years of age.<sup>74</sup>

In Bangladesh, the link has already been made between highly urbanized areas and anti-militancy operations by security forces against violent extremists. Gazipur, located at the heart of Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry, has been one such rapidly growing and urbanizing district. In October 2016, seven militants were killed during a joint police and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) raid. A recent report by the Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS) at the University of Dhaka studying community experiences in Gazipur suggests that extremists are attracted to Gazipur because its dense and diverse population of internal migrants makes outsiders less visible. Regarded as a "planning zone for criminals," the district is a place where drugs and weapons are also available.<sup>75</sup> The report also raises several interesting questions about the proliferation of unresolved grievances in impoverished urban areas stemming from a lack of sanitation, high crime, and underemployment, and whether these factors lead to greater affinity for extremist views. It also asks how migrant demographics and experiences might shape attitudes toward the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution. Again, further study of these narratives needs to be encouraged.

## Online Communication

As wealth and urbanization have increased, innovation has led to falling costs and rapidly increasing access to the Internet, particularly among wealthier and better-educated Bangladeshis. Bangladesh was a relative latecomer to the Internet, with limited access becoming first available in 1996; however, the country is rapidly catching up. In February 2017, improvements in technology infrastructure increased available bandwidth six-fold.<sup>76</sup> The number of Bangladeshis with Internet access has risen from 93,261 in 2000 to 21,439,070 in less than two decades.<sup>77</sup> Broadband and mobile phone subscriptions have also increased.<sup>78</sup> Some analysts attribute the rise of militancy in Bangladesh to this combination of rapid urbanization and technological growth.<sup>79</sup> The intersection of these trends deserves closer study to determine if, and how, they might interact with religious and political extremist violence.

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73 CARE Bangladesh, "Urban Socio-Economic Study of Gazipur City Corporation (GCC)," July 31, 2014.

74 Ibid.

75 CGS, "CGS Peace Report," The University of Dhaka, May-June 2017.

76 "Bangladesh Connects Second Submarine Cable on Feb. 21," *Dhaka Tribune*, February 8, 2017.

77 World Bank, "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)." [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017a; "Bangladesh Internet Users," Internet Live Stats, accessed June 2017, [www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/bangladesh/](http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/bangladesh/)

78 World Bank, "Fixed Broadband Subscriptions." [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017c. Retrieved from data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.BBND; World Bank, "Mobile Cellular Subscriptions (per 100 people)." [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017d. Retrieved from data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2.

79 Mubashar Hasan, "Threats of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh Are a Symptom of Deeper Social and Political Problems," *The Conversation*, January 11, 2017.



# Social Change, Dislocation, and Displacement

In addition to globalization, urbanization, and online communication, Bangladesh is also experiencing a period of rapid social change driven by economic growth that is challenging longstanding cultural and social mores. Some argue that local militancy may, at least in part, be a reflection of a much broader crisis of masculinity. Men who might already be inclined to see themselves occupying less privileged positions in the global social order find that, increasingly, they must share the space to allow for inclusion of women. In South Asia, some religious groups frame the redistribution of “gendered” power as the result of Western influence designed to isolate or weaken Muslim men. This dynamic was demonstrated in the thirteen demands framed by the religiously conservative group Hefazat-e-Islam in 2013, which included putting an end to “free-mixing of men and women” as well as what they saw as the “anti-Islam women policy” of the government. One of the factors that triggered the formation of Hefazat-e-Islam was the introduction of new women’s rights legislation in 2009.<sup>80</sup>

Women’s role in Bangladeshi society appears to be changing amid an influx of jobs created by globalization in manufacturing and amid associated trends in urbanization. The 2011 census found that young women aged 15-29 accounted for a dominant portion of the country’s rural-urban migration flow.<sup>81</sup> What these young women are doing when they reach urban areas is not entirely clear. There are, however, indications that some of them may be entering the labor force. According to World Bank predictions, Bangladesh’s female workforce will grow from 34 to 82 percent over the next decade.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) reported that, from 2010-13, the share of women in manufacturing doubled and became much higher than that of men.<sup>83</sup> Could extremists be exploiting social tensions resulting from a rapid influx of young women into the urban workforce? These dynamics, as they apply to Bangladesh, merit greater scrutiny.

Analysts looking for links among social change, women’s workforce participation, and extremism will be frustrated until basic workforce data collection is improved in Bangladesh. In a 2013 examination of female labor participation in the country, International Labour Organization (ILO) analysts noted that data on female labor force participation is irregular and insufficient to conduct accurate statistical examinations of certain relationships.<sup>84</sup> Reliable long-term statistics about Bangladesh’s labor force are simply not available. In a positive development in March 2017, however, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, with technical assistance from the World Bank, published the first “Quarterly Labour Force Survey” (QLFS) covering July 2015 to June 2016.<sup>85</sup> This 2015-16 QLFS will provide a critical resource for researchers

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80 Toufique Imrose Khalidi, “Behind the Rise of Bangladesh’s Hifazat,” *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2013.

81 Gavin Jones, et al., *Urbanization and Migration in Bangladesh*, 2016.

82 Rejaul Karim Byron and Md Fazlur Rahman, “Women Workforce Growing Fast,” *The Daily Star*, October 11, 2015.

83 ADB, “Employment and the Labor Market in Bangladesh: Overview of Trends and Challenges,” ADB Briefs, No. 62, August 2016.

84 Rushidan I. Rahman and Rizwanul Islam, “Female Labour Force Participation in Bangladesh: Trends, Drivers and Barriers,” ILO Asia-Pacific Working Paper Series, International Labour Organization, October 2013, 9.

85 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, “Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2015-2016,” (Accessed June 16, 2017).

and policymakers. However, unless the government continues to regularly collect and publish these vital data, this survey will offer little more than a noncontiguous snapshot of once-current trends. Furthermore, while quantitative information is valuable, qualitative studies in this area may produce even more fruitful insights into these dynamics.

How extremist groups respond to changes in women's roles in Bangladesh is relevant to ongoing debate around assumptions about the impact of female empowerment on efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE). Some have argued that female empowerment has the potential to influence the success of CVE programming and strategies in Bangladesh.<sup>86</sup> Others suggest that cultural notions of masculinity can be a driver of religiously motivated violence. In Pakistan, for example, observers have noticed that much of the discourse around “blasphemy” involves “appeals to...manhood.”<sup>87</sup>

Debates regarding gender and extremism are further complicated by reports indicating that a growing number of Bangladeshi women are becoming involved in extremist violence.<sup>88</sup> The participation of females as combatants is not new in South Asia.<sup>89</sup> Even so, the path to radicalization for women is no clearer than it is for men. As with their male counterparts, there is diversity in the profiles of women who become radicalized.<sup>90</sup> This diversity notwithstanding, further study of the specific experiences of women may yield important insights for effective counter-extremism programming.<sup>91</sup>

## Migration and Displacement

International migration is a prominent feature of the social landscape of Bangladesh. An estimated 10.4 million Bangladeshi nationals are employed overseas; twelve percent of the workforce leaves the country annually.<sup>92</sup> Bangladeshis abroad infuse billions of dollars in remittances into the country's economy.<sup>93</sup> The advance of climate-related sea level changes has the potential to significantly reshape Bangladesh's deltaic

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86 Krista London Couture, “A Gendered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Women in Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Applied Successfully in Bangladesh and Morocco.” Policy Paper, The Brookings Institution, July 2014.

87 Ayehsa Iftikhar, “Blasphemy and Extremism,” Keynote conversation at the Blasphemy Laws as a Challenge to Religious Freedom conference at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, April 20, 2016.

88 Kamrul Hasan and Arifur Rahman Rabbi, “Bangladesh's Female Jihadists,” *The Dhaka Tribune*, December 25, 2016.

89 Nazneen Mohsina, “Growing Trends of Female Jihadism in Bangladesh,” *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2017.

90 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015.

91 Ibid.

92 International Organization for Migration, “Bangladesh Country Strategy Plan (2017-2020), 2017.

93 Bangladesh received over \$13 billion (in current USD) in remittances in 2016, or approximately 6.2% of its GDP. For more, see: World Bank, “Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP).” [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017e. Retrieved from [data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS); World Bank, “Personal Remittances, Received (current US\$).” [Data file]. World Development Indicators, 2017f. Retrieved from [data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT)

terrain, which could result in unprecedented levels of internal displacement and external outmigration.<sup>94</sup> Amid these trends, concern is growing that radicalization is being imported by members of the Bangladeshi diaspora.

Concern regarding radicalization trends flowing in from the Bangladeshi diaspora long predates the active involvement of foreign citizens of Bangladeshi descent in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack.<sup>95</sup> For example, militants like JMB founder Abdur Rahman brought home violent extremist ideas and tactics after returning from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bangladeshi security analysts have also expressed concern about extremism in the expatriate community living in the UK.<sup>96</sup> In 2015, a British man of Bangladeshi origin was arrested in connection with the murders of prominent secular bloggers. The preceding year, another British citizen of Bangladeshi origin was arrested in Dhaka on charges of recruiting fighters for Da'esh operations in Syria.<sup>97</sup> More recently, concerns have been raised regarding Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia and Singapore, many of whom support ABT, and their efforts to recruit fellow workers for engagement in violence at home.<sup>98</sup>

There is also concern that radicalism is arriving with migrants flowing into Bangladesh from neighboring areas. An estimated 400,000 undocumented Myanmar nationals live in the southern areas of Bangladesh,<sup>99</sup> and there are legitimate concerns that the mishandling of the growing insurgency in Myanmar could increase those numbers.<sup>100</sup> Rohingya militants in Myanmar and in sprawling refugee camps near the Bangladeshi town of Cox's Bazaar, may fuel further militancy. The Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), established during the early 1980s, is thought to have trained and collaborated with HuJI-B and JMB<sup>101</sup> in the hills of southeastern Bangladesh.<sup>102</sup> The government of Bangladesh clamped down on the RSO in 2001.<sup>103</sup> At the same time, however, the ruling BNP-JI alliance was accused of having tacitly encouraged RSO activities.<sup>104</sup>

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94 Robert Glennon, "The Unfolding Tragedy of Climate Change in Bangladesh," *Scientific American*, April 21, 2017.

95 International Crisis Group, "The Threat from Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh," Asia Report No. 187, March 1, 2010.

96 Simon Tisdall and Anna Ridout, "British Jihadis in Bangladesh Fanning Flames of Extremism, Says Dhaka," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2015.

97 "Bangladesh Arrests Three Men Including Briton over Murders of Secular Bloggers," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2015; Serajul Quadir, "Bangladesh Arrests Briton for Suspected Islamic State Recruitment," *Reuters*, September 29, 2014.

98 IPAC, "How Southeast Asian and Bangladeshi Extremism Intersect," Report No. 37, Institute for Policy Analysis on Conflict, (May 8, 2017): 1.

99 International Organization for Migration, "Bangladesh Country Strategy Plan (2017-2020)," (2017).

100 International Crisis Group, "Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State," Asia Report No. 283, (December 15, 2016a): 21.

101 Bertill Lintner, "Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh," in *Religious Radicalism in and Security in South Asia*, ed. by Satu P. Limaye, Mohan Malik, and Robert Wirsing, (Honolulu, HI: APCSS, 2004), 413–436.

102 Fair, et al., "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?", 12.

103 Lintner, "Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh," 2002.

104 Fair, et al., "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What the Data Say?", 2016.

At one point, HuJI-B declared a desire to expand its activities into non-Muslim majority countries, such as Myanmar and the Philippines, seeking a closer relationship with the RSO to achieve this.<sup>105</sup> In early 2017, Malaysian counter-terrorism officials warned that Da'esh had been using the Rohingya issue to recruit new militants.<sup>106</sup> This is not simply a problem for Rohingya. Other analysts have noted that Bangladeshi students enrolled in Malaysian universities have developed pro-Da'esh sympathies, either at home or while studying in Malaysia. Some have used Kuala Lumpur as their point of departure for travel to fight in Syria, where they network with other Southeast Asian militants.<sup>107</sup>

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105 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 117.

106 Rozanna Latiff, "Myanmar Faces Danger from Islamic State Militants, Malaysian Police Say," *Reuters*, January 4, 2017.

107 IPAC, "How Southeast Asian and Bangladeshi Extremism Intersect," 2017.

# POLITICAL TRENDS

## The Rise of Da'esh and Al-Qaeda Affiliates

Before the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, it was thought that Da'esh had not infiltrated South Asia to the same extent as its rival, al-Qaeda.<sup>108</sup> The extent to which Holey Artisan and other recent attacks might be connected to Da'esh, or simply inspired by their credo, remains uncertain. Groups such as ABT, however, have reported ties to both Da'esh and Al-Qaeda.<sup>109</sup> In 2015, Da'esh's propaganda magazine *Dabiq* also featured an article entitled "The Revival of Jihad in Bengal," claiming responsibility for specific attacks in Bangladesh and promising more.<sup>110</sup> In early 2016, *Dabiq* published an article reiterating that Da'esh was present in Bangladesh and suggesting that the group's operations in the country were extensive. The edition also included profiles of individual Bangladeshi fighters and spoke of Muslims living under the oppression of Buddhists and Hindus, particularly in Myanmar, and advocating for killing Hindus across the border in India.<sup>111</sup>

Besides Al-Qaeda and Da'esh, other regional militants have created networks with suspected ties to Bangladesh. Pakistan-based LeT, for example, is thought to operate through a number of front organizations, including Jama'at-ud-Dawa and Falah-e-Insaniat.<sup>112</sup> Shahadat-e Al-Hiqma, which held a press conference in 2003 to say it was planning violence in Bangladesh before being banned in 2005, is also suspected of ties to LeT, receiving funds from a mosque in Karachi and from (or via) JMB.<sup>113</sup> Apart from this support from LeT, JMB might also be supported by Gulf-based charities like the Kuwaiti Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage that was designated by the US as a funder for Al-Qaeda in 2008.<sup>114</sup> Greater understanding of the nature and extent of the influence of transnational violent extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Da'esh is needed.

## State Priorities, Political Dissent, and the Security Sector

With their attacks on bloggers and intellectuals, militants have been accused of seeking to use violence to curb freedom of expression and impose limits on acceptable public discourse. The government of Bangla-

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108 Atif J. Ahmad and Michael Kugelman, "Will ISIS Infect Bangladesh?", *The National Interest*, December 8, 2015.

109 Bangladesh Police Arrest Suspect in Killing of Gay Activist," *Associated Press News*, May 15, 2016.

110 "Islamic State threatens More Attacks in 'Bengal', Meaning Bangladesh," *bdnews24.com*, November 21, 2015.

111 Anup Kaphle, "ISIS Really Wants You to Know It's Operating in Bangladesh," *BuzzFeed News*, April 13, 2016.

112 Fair, et al., "Who Supports Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," 13; see also, Christine Fair and Seth Oldmixon, "Think Again: Islamism and Militancy in Bangladesh," *The National Interest*, August 13, 2015.

113 Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 122-23; Ahmad and Kugelman, "Will ISIS Infect Bangladesh?", December 8, 2015.

114 U.S. Department of Treasury, "Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling Al Qaida Network," press release, July 13, 2008.

desh has also been accused of new forms of censorship since the Shahbagh protests in 2013. In its *World Report 2017*, Human Rights Watch reported that the government had “clamped down on media and civil society,” adding that “state authorities detained, maimed, killed, and disappeared members of the political opposition.” The government’s initial reaction to the first round of blogger killings was to suggest that the bloggers themselves should “refrain from ‘hurting religious sentiments.’”<sup>115</sup> Human rights organizations warned that such statements sent “mixed messages” about violent extremism. They urged authorities to prosecute attackers rather than individuals expressing opinions about religion.<sup>116</sup>

Ultimately, Bangladeshi authorities pursued both alleged “provocateurs” and militants.<sup>117</sup> The number of suspected militants killed during efforts to capture them, without any prosecution or legal due process, is substantial. A former member of HuJI-B now associated with ABT, Shariful Islam Shihab, was among those arrested for killing a gay rights activist.<sup>118</sup> A month later, he was shot in a gunfight with police.<sup>119</sup> The police also killed nine militants suspected of plotting an attack similar to that on the Holey Artisan Bakery.<sup>120</sup> In August 2016, the police shot and killed the suspected mastermind of the Holey Artisan attack and two other suspects.<sup>121</sup> The previous BNP-JI government similarly used the armed forces, the police, and an elite joint force known as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). It commenced operations in April 2004; by July of that year, the national media were openly expressing concern about its activities.<sup>122</sup> A 2006 Human Rights Watch report wrote that the RAB had been “implicated in the unlawful killings of at least 350 people in custody, and the alleged torture of hundreds more.”<sup>123</sup>

There are several reasons to fear the situation is getting worse. When the AL returned to power in 2009, it empowered the police and the RAB to apprehend “extremists,” dismantle militant cells, and counter their ability to radicalize and recruit. By 2011, the number of unlawful killings by RAB had more than doubled.<sup>124</sup> Accurate statistics are hard to obtain, but home ministry officials told one research organization that more than 2,400 militants were arrested between 2005 and 2013.<sup>125</sup> As of April 2016, at least 154 Islamist extremists were on death row.<sup>126</sup> Suspected militants are not alone in having been targeted by the paramilitary force. In a rare example of accountability, sixteen members of RAB were sentenced to death

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115 Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Disappearances, Clampdown on Critics,” January 12, 2017.

116 Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Stop Promoting Self Censorship,” August 11, 2015.

117 “Bloggers in Bangladesh Protest over Arrest of Writers,” BBC News, April 4, 2013.

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122 “RAB Operations: Reign It In Before It Turns into a Monster,” *The Daily Star*, July 23, 2004.

123 Human Rights Watch, “Judge, Jury, and Executioner: Torture and Extrajudicial Killings by Bangladesh’s Elite Security Force,” December 13, 2006.

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in January 2017 for their role in politically motivated killings.<sup>127</sup> In May 2017, RAB detained twenty-nine young men “on suspicion of homosexuality.”<sup>128</sup> On May 20, 2017, police raided the Dhaka office of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia; they were reportedly searching for “anti-state materials,” but nothing was found.<sup>129</sup> Mrs. Zia also faces a number of legal cases, including one for sedition after an AL lawyer accused her of questioning the number of people killed in the 1971 war of independence.<sup>130</sup>

This situation is problematic, not only because of human rights concerns, but also because extra-judicial killings and politically motivated raids can damage the credibility of the state and fuel extremist propaganda. Killing suspects and dampening due process deprives researchers and officials of critical open source information that could elucidate the drivers and networks of violent extremists.

## The Evolution and Decline of Secularism

There is growing concern about whether Bangladesh’s secular “center” can hold in the face of increased pressure from Islamist groups. The AL has long been held up as the standard bearer of secular politics in Bangladesh. The party’s return to power in 2009 was heralded by many as a reaffirmation of the country’s commitment to secularism.<sup>131</sup> During the AL’s tenure, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has offered repeated reassurances to Bangladesh’s religious minorities, particularly Hindus.<sup>132</sup> Following a series of attacks against Hindus last November, the AL government vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice, pledging that “communal harmony will be maintained at all costs.”<sup>133</sup>

Concern is growing, however, about Bangladesh’s commitment to secularism in the face of intense pressure from Islamist groups. In January 2017, changes were made to textbooks in accordance with the demands of groups like Hefazat-e-Islam.<sup>134</sup> Soon after, the government weakened prohibitions against child marriage.<sup>135</sup> In April 2017, the AL boycotted traditional processions celebrating the *Bengali New Year*, also called Pohela Boishakh, after criticism by Islamists.<sup>136</sup> In May 2017, in the dead of night,

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127 “A Lesson in Law,” *The Daily Star*, January 19, 2017.

128 “RAB Detains 29 ‘Homosexuals,’” *Prothom Alo*, May 19, 2017.

129 Arifur Rahman Rabbi and Manik Miazee, “Police Raid Khaleda’s Gulshan Office,” *Dhaka Tribune*, May 20, 2017.

130 “SC Order on Khaleda’s Barapukuria Graft Case May 28,” *Dhaka Tribune*, May 22, 2017; “Sedition Trial against Khaleda Stayed for 6 Months,” *The Daily Star*, March 29, 2017.

131 Jyoti Thottam, “A Secular Victory in Bangladesh Election,” *Time*, December 30, 2008.

132 “PM Stresses Full Rights for Hindus,” *The Daily Star*, October 14, 2013.

133 “None to Be Spared over Attack on Hindus: AL,” *The Daily Star*, November 1, 2016.

134 Ellen Barry and Julfikar Ali Manik, “To Secular Bangladeshis, Textbook Changes Are a Harbinger,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2017.

135 Maher Sattar and Ellen Barry, “Bangladesh Weakens Longstanding Law Against Underage Marriage,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2017.

136 Ikhtisad Ahmed, “Three More Signs that Bangladesh’s Ruling Awami League Has Tightened Its Embrace of Islamism,” *Scroll.in*, April 28, 2017.

the government removed a Greek-style statue of Lady Justice from the grounds of the Supreme Court, acquiescing to the demands of Islamist groups.<sup>137</sup>

Some analysts have expressed concerns that “a dark political calculation” might lie behind these changes.<sup>138</sup> AL officials have told reporters that the party is looking to a strategic partnership with Hefazat-e-Islam in the lead-up to the 2019 general elections.<sup>139</sup> These reports were swiftly denied by party leaders, who characterized the members of Hefazat as “religion-based political opportunists” and extremists. Still, repeated concessions have left many worried that secularism in Bangladesh is in retreat.<sup>140</sup> Whatever the reasoning behind these moves, even the appearance of collaboration and concessions to extremist groups is likely to result in the normalization and proliferation of extremist ideology in Bangladesh, just as it did in other nations that employed such strategies.<sup>141</sup>

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137 Julfikar Ali Manik and Ellen Barry, “Statue of Woman Removed from Bangladesh’s Supreme Court,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2017.

138 K. Anis Ahmed, “Bangladesh’s Creeping Islamism,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 2017.

139 Anwar Hossain, “AL’s Hefazat Tie Strategic, Temporary!,” *Prothom Alo*, April 14, 2017.

140 Kudrote Khoda Sobuj Kushtia, “Inu: Hefazat Has Nothing to Do with AL-Led Alliance,” *Dhaka Tribune*, April 18, 2017.

141 Husain Haqqani, “Islamists and the ‘Arab Spring’,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, 2013, 5-14.

# CONCLUSION

## What's Missing from the Map?

Reviewing the past and present of violent extremism in Bangladesh reveals a deep history of political violence stretching back to the country's struggle for independence—a history that has now merged with the ideologies and deadly tactics of global extremist movements. The challenge for those seeking to understand and counter this violence lies in accumulating the knowledge required to parse the domestic factors supporting it from the broad international factors that intensify and reshape it. While by no means comprehensive, this report does identify certain gaps in our understanding regarding the impact of specific social, economic, and political dynamics. Addressing these gaps is an essential first step for those seeking to develop new strategies and programs to counter violent extremism.

## Motivations

Bangladesh's violent political history and its struggles to define a national identity, fought between secular and religious parties, are well known. Recently, however, the country's leap into the realm of international terrorism, as witnessed in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack and its alleged ties to Da'esh, has called into question previously held assumptions about extremist violence in Bangladesh. Given the privileged backgrounds of the attackers, for instance, assumptions about poverty and traditional forms of education driving such violence may have lost their validity. A commitment to better understanding the motivations, frustrations, and aspirations of Bangladesh's new class of violent extremists is needed.

## Social Geography

In the past two decades, Bangladesh has experienced profound changes. Rapid economic growth has been accompanied by dramatic social change in the form of greater global integration, urbanization, and expanding opportunities for women. Layered over this dynamic have been advances in communication technologies, including expanding Internet access and increasing mobile phone usage. The new urban economy and the jobs it brings as a dividend of globalization may disproportionately benefit women, with the potential to challenge traditional notions of masculinity and, in doing so, foment a violent response. Large-scale international migration adds another layer of complexity, exposing Bangladeshis who travel abroad to radical new ideas and networks. Further research is necessary to explore how recent changes in Bangladesh's political economy and social fabric interact with extremist violence.

## Political Trends

Finally, political dynamics in the country merit further research and ongoing attention. The ideas of al-Qaeda and the rise of Da'esh are ever-present and available to the small cadre of people in the country that is able and willing to receive them. The state's response to radicalism and its use of security forces

to deal with threats, if perceived as heavy-handed, however, could risk furthering violent extremism. A reluctance to uphold secular and democratic principles and defend minorities in the face of attacks may also encourage additional radicalism in the country. In an increasingly polarized environment, political dynamics and state responses to extremism need to be constantly monitored for their impact on militant trends. Closely tracking these political dynamics will remain an integral part of any effort to develop effective responses to the rise of violent extremism in Bangladesh.

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